

Who cares? The here and now needs of children

Wednesday, April 13, 2005

Moira Rayner

'Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.' Oscar Wilde, whose children didn't. Some children have a bigger job than others.

Child abuse reporting rates are soaring and nobody cares, it would seem from the muffled response to the latest attempt to make us care. The La Trobe University *Childhood Abused Report*, commissioned by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, was released on 10 April and it hardly rated on Google. Its analysis of child abuse notification reports and the latest research on its prevalence and consequences makes rotten reading. Though not all states mandate reporting and they all do it differently, more than 219 000 reports were recorded nationally in 2003 and the rate of reporting is rising every year as is the 'substantiation' rate (more than 40 000). It is particularly dispiriting that the report does not have any new proposals for what it concludes is a pandemic of abuse, or its underlying cause: a lack of respect for children.

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation commemorates two little girls who were killed by a gunman in Port Arthur in a massacre that invoked a rare, effective, national reaction. The Commonwealth forced through uniform gun laws designed to prevent these instruments of destruction from fulfilling their purpose, including a buy-back scheme funded by a national levy.

It seems to have occurred to nobody that we could prevent the destruction of the potential of tens of thousands of Australian children whose hopeless or helpless, criminal or ignorant or just desperate parents bash, cripple, ignore, exploit or abandon them, if we had the will.



saferstreets.org.nz

If we accepted that child abuse was a national disgrace we would readily set aside our parochial concerns and business preoccupations. We could create a comprehensive, national program of child abuse prevention laws, policies and programs and decent services, available for every child. A levy on birth and marriage or even car registrations, perhaps, might fund it, and maybe generous tax rewards for voluntary contributions to a program of innovative child protection research and services, too. Real collaboration among state and territory and local and federal governments and the not-for-profit sector

could achieve astonishing results. A national children's commissioner would give a focus and governmental priority to what would be national war on our ignorance of children's developmental and other needs and disrespect for their human dignity, and give generous support to all parents on how best to protect children's rights.

On the day the report was launched, State premiers made passionate speeches about the national interest in the distribution of GST and the rights of the states to raise and decide how to spend their tax revenue. Health spokesmen understood the urgency of ensuring that new pharmaceuticals were safe. The Prime Minister was clear about the necessity for a unified national industrial relations system, and asserted the Commonwealth's willingness to assume responsibility for public infrastructure and services if the states did not meet proper standards.

If we can act for the good of the national economy, why the hell can't we do it for the nation's children?

A relatively few, loved and innocent men and women and children died in Port Arthur. There are tens of thousands of children who are today suffering emotional and physical abuse and neglect, and a tiny proportion, just 10 per cent of the reports, who are sexually abused. Some will die. Every state and territory has its own web of domestic violence, criminal, child protection, education and health laws, regulations and ways of reporting and administrative networks and services, the resultant mess of inconsistent, constantly changing and ineffective systems, constantly 'under review' and under criticism, and can't save them.

For years children's advocates have pointed out the uselessness of the current system. It is scandalous that charities have for so long given speeches to an empty chamber. Children should be our priority. The research evidence is clear about the damage done when children witness let alone suffer domestic violence, are homeless, miss out on proper nutrition and stimulation in early life, and lack proper nurturing and boundaries. It passes through generations. The Commonwealth will act if the states try to go it alone in business regulation, but seems quite satisfied to leave alone the muddle of laws, funding gaps and fiefdoms that leave children to be hit, hurt, rejected, used or left hungry and alone.

It is not enough to pay for more investigators. Swamped with 'unreliable' reports, they leave too many cases unexamined, but many are not 'reported' at all because of a well-founded fear of harmful and inadequate, stigmatising intervention.

We need to fight for children's rights now, not damages for the adults they may become.

I don't want to see a national mandatory reporting scheme. Mandatory reporting was introduced four

decades ago because we thought that if doctors had to report children's injuries the problem would be exposed and effective interventions would follow. But as Dr. Maria Harries and Prof. Mike Clare pointed out in their comprehensive 2002 review for WA government, *Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse: Evidence and Options*, there is no evidence that (costly) mandatory reporting has done anything to improve support and services for children. There is overwhelming evidence that, worldwide, mandatory reporting systems are in chaos.

We must build on what we know. Good parents subordinate their personal preferences and priorities to the 'here and now' needs of their children. A good society must do the same. What a difference it would make if the disciplines and professions, government and community groups, and all levels of government worked together on eradicating the conditions in which child abuse thrives.

It is a modest proposal. We are devouring our children because of our national preoccupation with wealth and goods. I propose putting our billions into a national, well-researched, universally-available, non-stigmatising children's program, an investment in all children's right to a decent quality of life, funded and delivered by the nation so that wonderful services are equally accessible to a child in Moe, Mulan or Vaucluse, as a matter of right.

If Mr Howard could raise billions and achieve national gun laws to prevent another Port Arthur massacre, what couldn't we save? Our souls, maybe?

About the author

Moira Rayner has been a life-long advocate of the rights of children, and was the Director of the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London.

She is the Deputy Managing Director for the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment Limited, a lawyer and a writer

Published Comments

What's your opinion? Tell us what you think by adding a comment to offer feedback on this story.

Dear Moira,

I've enjoyed your contributions to New Matilda and you are correct about the lack of response to the Latrobe Uni. Report. However, after reading it myself I have many doubts about the approach that the report takes and feel that you need to direct your emphasis towards far greater support for families, rather than for protection of children.

I have no doubt that the rate of child abuse is far too high and that many children need much greater supports. But, to quote the incidents of reports to child protection services does not do justice to the real problem. The statistics and media grabbing line 'a child is abused every 13 minutes' simply further fuel the perception that parents are the greatest danger to their children.

That parents are fuelled by paranoia and fear about the harm that they can do to their children is a sad indictment of what our society has become. For, raising children is not solely the responsibility of parents, but the responsibility of the community, of all of us. The lack of support we give to parents, and the pressure we place on them is but one factor that reports such as the Latrobe University Child Abuse Report does not consider.

Within my work in early childhood services and my own personal life I have confronted the pandemic that is 'uncovered' in this report. But, the real pandemic is of a society with massive inequities of wealth division.

In Victoria, the greatest rates of child protection notification and re-notification are extremely concentrated. We wouldn't like to say it, but ultimately they are located within modern day slums. The Victorian Government have introduced initiatives that aim to support families and keep them out of the system by providing them with the types of supports that allow them to become more functional. Education and counselling for parents, safety training for the kids, linking them back into maternal and child health services and so on. The initial results show some promise.

But again, this is only scratching at an itch. The core problem, like so many in this society, are structural. Investing more and more money into children's services means nothing to those children whose parents are focussed on their drug addiction, their gambling habit or trying to feed themselves (let alone their kids). Those children never even reach those services.

If we want to improve the well-being of our children, we need to improve the well-being of our society.

It is well and good to idolise and obsess over children. We are sociologically programmed into

their innocence and helplessness. But, children are more resilient and capable than we give them credit for. Child abuse is abhorrent, but it is no means the conclusion to a child's opportunities. Whether we are facing a new pandemic – or simply identifying a problem that has always existed is still open to debate. What is not open to debate is the rising level of poverty in Australia.

Child abuse is an issue of dollars. But, it isn't the child protection system that needs them. It is the families struggling below the poverty line.

Daniel Donahoo

Wednesday, April 13, 2005

Once again a thought provoking article by Moira and well-considered response from Daniel Donahoo. This is the type of debate that Australia needs to be having on a regular basis.

It is a relief that sites such as NM have emerged, where conversations about urgent socio-economic and cultural problems can happen.

However, for the debate to become more inclusive, the mainstream media must, as Moira suggests, let such concerns rate a mention on their programmes.

As Gore Vidal pointed out to Tonyy Jones earlier this week on Lateline, the mainstream media, and television in particular, is still overwhelmingly influential.

Our narrow FTA commercial network system is engaged in two-pronged battles over ratings and revenue; there is no concern for the realpolitik of the society it bleeds. The current affair shows have, themselves, descended into adverts for new products half the time.

As an example, just last night the local TV station, GWN, had a programming problem ten minutes into a particular show.

Time was, when such a glitch would evoke some kind of apologetic response from the station. Not any more; or at least, not this time on this station. They simply played commercials, one after the other (for 20 minutes) until the next programme was due, with not a word of explanation.

"Just sit back and consume folks, 'cos that's what it's all about!"

Barry Parsons

Thursday, April 14, 2005

Jack Robertson, writing in Margo Kingston's Webdiary recently, asked a similar questions to that which Moira Rayner concludes with:

"What's the first function of any truly civilised society? Isn't it first and foremost to make sure that we all collectively look after each other, are happy and safe and much more than just materially 'fulfilled', especially all our kids and any of those among us who are likewise vulnerable? The sick, the old, the lost, the lonely, the broken? Isn't it up to our leaders to remind us about these Human priorities daily?" [Grand new dreamtime dreams, Webdiary](#)

I think even ideologically-committed neocons would find it difficult to deny the essential truth of these notions. And yet, with a Federal budget surplus apparently in the region of \$10 billion and State budgets in surplus there are social welfare programs closing for lack of money. It's only a matter of time until at the next election politicians of both major stripes will on one hand be promising billion-dollar surpluses and on the other telling all sorts of welfare programs and welfare recipients that there's not enough money for them.

Terry Murphy

Thursday, April 14, 2005

Is there any report on what actually works in reducing child abuse?

Terry Aust

Tuesday, April 19, 2005